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US-KOREA RELATIONS

US-KOREA RELATIONS: WHEN IT RAINS, IT POURS

MASON RICHEY, HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES
ROB YORK, PACIFIC FORUM

Winter/Spring 2022 was a dynamic, clarifying time in US-Korea relations, following [repetitious](#), [turbid](#) reporting periods in 2021. South Korea geared up for and held a presidential election, [won with a razor-thin margin](#) by conservative Yoon Suk-yeol. His new administration, replacing the progressive government of term-limited Moon Jae-in, promises to place very different accents on the US-South Korea alliance and inter-Korean relations. Washington is [relieved to see](#) Yoon assume office, as US senior leadership, policymakers, and alliance managers are [comfortable](#) with his foreign and security/defense policy team. Moon and his progressives did plenty to advance the US-South Korea alliance, but their parochial, Peninsula-focused diplomacy was occasionally a source of friction and often seemingly quixotic vis-à-vis North Korea. The Yoon administration is [poised to attempt](#) to make the US-South Korea alliance more comprehensive geographically and functionally, although conservative administrations also pose their own idiosyncratic risks to the US-ROK alliance.

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For its part, North Korea embarked on an [unprecedented](#) missile launch spree during the January–April 2022 reporting period, with [13 separate tests](#) or demonstrations (with three more to follow so far in May) of a variety of known and new systems ranging from short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) to hypersonic weapons to (supposedly) the previously untested *Hwasong-17* inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM). Three more [missile tests](#) followed in May. North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong Un [subtly clarified](#) that Pyongyang’s nuclear posture is not totally [deterrence-focused](#), but includes warfighting use, underscoring the [likelihood the regime develops](#) tactical nuclear weapons. This would [also likely mean](#) a seventh nuclear test. Pyongyang’s provocations and fiery rhetoric were leavened with celebration, as April parades in North Korea marked the 110th Day of the Sun (the birthday of Kim Il Sung) and the 90th anniversary of the foundation of the Korean People’s Army (KPA). These events have a primarily domestic focus, but they also serve as international propaganda, announcing outwardly that North Korea is strong and united. This attempt at perception management will be tested by reality, as an [outbreak](#) of omicron variant COVID-19 in early May represents a serious risk for North Korea.

Looming in the background of these events was the Russia-Ukraine war, which has current and future implications for US relations with the Koreans. South Korea [slowly but surely supported](#) US-led sanctions on Russia, while North Korea predictably blamed the US for the conflict. Going forward, Washington’s likely increasing pressure on Moscow will be a litmus test for Seoul’s willingness to work comprehensively with its alliance partner on maintaining the international rules-based order; that same pressure campaign will also [open up possibilities](#) for greater [Pyongyang-Moscow](#) cooperation, notably in sanctions evasion.

US–South Korea: Just Do It

The most significant development in US–South Korea relations during the Winter/Spring 2022 reporting period was the South Korean presidential election in March. In the first place, pre-election uncertainty about the winner led to a slowdown in decisive action between Washington and Seoul. The Moon administration was fully a lame duck by January, dramatically reducing its ability to advance policy preferences, even in foreign and inter-Korean affairs.

Meanwhile the Biden administration was clearly willing to run out the clock on Moon, either expecting to get a conservative Yoon Suk-yeol administration more aligned with US priorities, or girding itself for another tricky progressive presidency under progressive candidate Lee Jae-myung.



Figure 1 South Korean President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol of the main opposition People Power Party celebrates with supporters at the party's headquarters on March 10, 2022 in Seoul, South Korea. Photo: Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images

Yoon won the election, but his extremely close victory margin (<1%) presents challenges all its own, as the new president entered office on May 10 with [little political capital](#) and a deeply divided electorate. Moreover, Yoon’s People Power Party does not hold a majority in the National Assembly—the progressive Democratic Party in fact holds a super-majority, with the next National Assembly election scheduled for 2024. On the one hand, Yoon’s difficulties in realizing his domestic agenda given socio-political polarization and a hostile National Assembly may sap energy and momentum from Yoon’s executive team. This could constrain Yoon’s willingness to enact bold, domestically risky foreign policy, such as transforming the US–South Korea alliance into a deeper and more expansive partnership, taking a harder line on China and accelerating Sino-Korean economic de-coupling, and resuscitating poor Seoul–Tokyo relations with an eye toward greater US–South Korea–Japan trilateral cooperation. On the other hand, deadlocked domestic legislation may lead Yoon to focus on action where his administration has the most prerogatives: foreign, security, and defense policy.

In a vacuum, Yoon’s foreign, security, and defense policy team has personnel inclined to think ambitiously about South Korea’s external

relations. The nominee for foreign minister (Rep. Park Jin) is well-appreciated in Washington, and the defense minister-nominee (Gen. (ret.) Lee Jong-sup) and National Security Advisor-appointee Kim Sung-han are solid backers of the US-South Korea alliance. They not only share Washington's [preferred perspective on North Korean denuclearization](#), but will enjoy a reservoir of trust with Biden administration personnel. Thus there is potential for important advancements in several areas of the US-South Korea alliance: geographic broadening, more vocal values-based diplomacy, enhanced South Korean cooperation with the Quad in a Quad-plus arrangement, bolstering extended nuclear deterrence, pushing back on problematic international behavior by China, and [greater](#) US-South Korea-Japan trilateral cooperation.

But policy is never made in a vacuum—the urgent always intrudes on the important. In April Yoon [dispatched](#) Rep. Park to Washington along with a team of diplomatic, regional (China and Japan), defense/security, and trade/economics experts. The new president's Policy Coordination Delegation [met senior officials](#) (including US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman) to discuss alliance-related issues ranging from North Korea to extended nuclear deterrence to trade to COVID vaccines, but sources say the delegation was strongly marked by how insistent the US was on three items: the war in Ukraine, dealing with China, and greater US-South Korea-Japan cooperation. All three items will test the president-elect's appetite and ability to take domestic political risks to raise the US-South Korea alliance to a new level and cash in his campaign promise to make South Korea a "global pivotal state."

Yoon's weak domestic political position means that ameliorating relations with Japan could be fraught and possibly socio-politically inflammatory, while pushing back on Chinese malfeasance in the region would risk economic blowback from Beijing that could have serious economic/employment repercussions as Yoon's People Power Party lays the groundwork for a tight 2024 election for control of the National Assembly. Washington's desire to have South Korea onside for increasing pressure on Moscow is the easiest for Seoul to satisfy, as South Korea has limited trade with Russia, but even that might be difficult: how far Yoon is willing to go in ramping up diplomatic and economic pressure on Moscow might depend on global/local

inflation and inter-Korean relations (where Russia can theoretically play a spoiler role).

As Yoon enters office, North Korea is, for the Biden administration, a [lower priority](#) than the Russia-Ukraine war and countering China. Even for a conservative South Korean administration eager to look beyond the Korean Peninsula in rejuvenating the US-South Korea alliance, the disparity of interest between Seoul and Washington vis-à-vis Pyongyang is a potential fault line. This will be even more the case if North Korea continues regular demonstrations and tests of components of its nuclear program and arsenal, including missiles and a potential [seventh nuclear test](#) that could lead to better production of tactical nuclear warheads that add to the threat toward South Korea (see next section). If the Biden administration has its hands full with Russia-Ukraine and/or China, the Yoon administration may feel compelled to adopt a more assertive stance to restore deterrence vis-à-vis the Kim regime, which may [feed into an escalatory cycle](#).

The Yoon and Biden administrations will have a chance to address North Korea—and other urgent and important issues—at a [leader-level summit](#) in Seoul scheduled for May 21, just before Biden travels to Tokyo for a Quad leaders meeting. Yoon's April delegation to Washington, led by Foreign Minister-nominee Park Jin, advocated for a Yoon-Biden summit "at an early date" and the White House obliged—although there is [some concern](#) the meeting may be coming too soon, beginning only 11 days after Yoon's inauguration, with his team barely in place and not fully in control of their respective personnel and bureaucracies. Moreover there is [some question](#) about a [suitable venue](#) for the summit, as President Yoon has insisted on a quixotic quest to immediately mothball the traditional presidential executive office and residence (the Blue House) in favor of a rushed relocation to the Yongsan grounds of the Ministry of National Defense.

Nevertheless, a full agenda awaits Biden and Yoon. Some of this agenda is inherited from the [successful May 2021 Biden-Moon summit](#), while other items will be novel, including the deteriorated international order consequent to the Russia-Ukraine war. [Evergreens and holdovers from 2021](#) will include supply-chain structures and resilience; technology security, standards, and investment (notably in the semiconductors sector); more or less subtle

pressure on China on everything from human rights to economic coercion to Beijing's relations with Moscow and Taipei; global public health and COVID vaccine production cooperation; climate change cooperation; South Korean and [US](#) shared interests and strategic outlook on the Indo-Pacific (read: South Korean support for the US Indo-Pacific Strategy); war-time operational control reversion to South Korea (OPCON transfer); and North Korea (with the 2022 summit likely featuring a harder South Korean line on North Korean [deterrence and denuclearization](#), given the new conservative administration's policy proclivities).

New business at the Biden-Yoon summit will include [US-South Korea-Japan cooperation](#) (a priority for Washington, in turn requiring improved Seoul-Tokyo ties, which Yoon has emphasized); the [possibility](#) of greater South Korea collaboration with the Quad in several capacities (presumably as a Quad Plus associate) to give greater heft to South Korea's dovetailing of its Southeast Asia policy with the US Indo-Pacific Strategy; re-starting full-scale, regular field training during US-South Korea joint military exercises, which have suffered from COVID disruptions and politico-diplomatic decisions favoring reduced exercises (which has led to US-South Korea combined force combat readiness [atrophy](#)); and discussion about the nature of the Biden administration's promised yet heretofore absent economic policy (the [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework](#)) for East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, hints of which may be given at the US-ASEAN summit a week prior to the Biden-Yoon meeting. South Korea will be expecting ([or at least hoping for](#)) something tangible and beneficial, which is [all the more important](#) considering South Korea's [pending application](#) to the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP, which emerged in the vacuum of US withdrawal from the original TPP).

The summit will also unfold against the backdrop of a global geopolitical shift away from liberal internationalism, in which cooperation among like-minded partners such as the US and South Korea is increasingly more important and endangered. Both presidents and their senior officials are aware of this, and doubtless much summit discussion will concern the primary drivers of the global lurch away from the international rules-based order: China and Russia. Washington will want to divine how serious the Yoon administration is in its apparent

tack toward more robustly pushing back against problematic Chinese behavior, as well as intention to continue keeping economic and diplomatic pressure on Russia. The new Yoon administration will want to get its bearings (both in general and vis-à-vis the Biden administration) and an idea of how sound US strategy is with respect to both the East Asia region and the rebuilding of degraded international order.

Aside from the South Korean presidential election, its consequences, and preparation for the Yoon-Biden summit, two other major developments impacted the US-South Korea relationship during the reporting period: the Russia-Ukraine war and North Korea's accelerated pace of missile testing. Concerning the former, the Moon administration had a mixed-record from a US perspective. Ultimately, in terms of [diplomatic and sanctions choices](#), Seoul [took the high road](#), recognizing that Russia's invasion is more than just an attack against another sovereign state, but [against sovereignty](#) as such and against the rules-based order generally. That said, initially the Blue House gave rhetorical support to Kyiv, but was slow to condemn the Kremlin by name. South Korea was also a follower—not a leader—in imposing sanctions on Russia. The South Korean National Assembly embarrassed the country with its reception of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky—[less than 20%](#) of Assembly members attended his video address.

The Yoon administration has taken over the challenges of Russia policy as of May 10. Yoon will need to maintain current sanctions on Russia, and may hear calls to support Ukraine with lethal weapons. Beyond that, the United States and European Union may strengthen sanctions, which South Korea would be expected to support. Washington and/or European capitals might also increase pressure on China to dissuade it from cooperating with Russia on sanctions evasion. Seoul may feel obliged to endorse such measures, which would complicate economic relations with its largest trading partner.

The military situation on the peninsula ratcheted up several notches during the January-April reporting period, which naturally impacts the US-South Korea alliance. Especially worrisome was North Korea's increased missile testing, notably of the [Hwasong-17](#) and a hypersonic missile with a [possibly maneuverable re-entry](#)

vehicle, as well as general advancement of its nuclear weapons program (see following section). The [response](#) from the US and South Korea ramped up accordingly, first with the [standard government condemnations](#) and obligatory shuttle- and [phone-diplomacy](#) by US and South Korean Special Envoys for North Korea (Sung Kim and Noh Kyu-duk, often with Japanese and Chinese counterparts), and then with increased military deterrence signaling from Washington and Seoul (including a [trilateral meeting](#) of US-South Korean-Japanese senior defense officials). The Yoon team [broached](#) re-deployment of US strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula. South Korea demonstrated its increasingly impressive conventional strike capabilities, including [submarine-launched ballistic missiles](#) (SLBMs). Seoul also announced the procurement of a US-made [SM-6 missile defense system](#) to be deployed on an Aegis-equipped *KDX-III* destroyer, as well as [intentions to purchase](#) close-in weapons systems (CIWS) for protecting surface ships from enemy missiles and aircraft. At various points, Washington responded to Pyongyang's missile testing by [carrying out extended and expanded ISR](#) near North Korea, as well as sending an [aircraft carrier strike group](#) (headed by the USS *Abraham Lincoln*) and a [guided-missile destroyer](#) into waters near the Korean Peninsula. The US and South Korea also [carried out](#) regularly scheduled joint command-post exercises.



Figure 2 U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim shakes hands with South Korea's Special Representative for the Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Noh Kyu-duk as they pose for a photo during a meeting at the Foreign Ministry in Seoul, South Korea on April 18, 2022. Photo: Ahn Young-joon/AP

US-North Korea: Have It Your Way

North Korea did not have a cheerful New Year's greeting for either the Biden administration or counterparts in the South. Ballistic missile

testing, which began to accelerate in Fall 2021—with hints at alarming new capabilities (or at least intent to develop them) in hypersonics with maneuverable re-entry vehicles, tactical nuclear weapons, and improved ICBMs—continued on Jan. 5 with a short-range ballistic [missile test](#). Pyongyang claimed the SRBM was hypersonic (a *Hwasong-8*), a technology that would greatly improve the North's capacity to render existing US and South Korean missile defense systems less effective, though Washington and Seoul have [cast doubt](#) on the claim. When the North test-fired [another missile](#) less than a week later (Jan. 10) and made the same hypersonic claims, a Pentagon spokesperson [insisted](#) that the test of ballistic missile technology constituted a violation of US sanctions, regardless of hypersonic capability.

The news worsened. North Korea conducted seven missile test launches in total in January, following the initial launches with [tests](#) of two train-launched ballistic missiles—useful for firing back should an initial attack take out its regular missile launchers—on Jan. 14, tactical-guided missiles (*KN-24*) on Jan. 17, two [long-range cruise missiles](#) on Jan. 25, and two *KN-23* SRBMs on the 27th. On Jan. 30 Pyongyang took things a step further, [launching](#) an apparent intermediate-range ballistic missile (*Hwasong-12*), which at the time was the longest-range missile tested since the North's self-imposed moratorium on long-range missile and nuclear testing in late 2017.

February, by comparison, was quiet, with just one test [recorded](#) on Feb. 27, although it was an important one. North Korea was cagey about the nature of the launch of a supposed MRBM, [hinting](#) that it was part of tests for placing [military reconnaissance satellites](#) in orbit. However, the data on range, apogee, trajectory, flight time, and other parameters were intriguing (possibly a bad fit for the narrative from Pyongyang), and it was later determined that the launch was likely a test of ICBM components, notably a “post-boost vehicle” or “bus,” which is critical for deploying multiple warheads on ICBMs.

The timing of the launch was also troubling, taking place just days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At a time when much of the world—US partners in North America, Europe, East Asia, and Oceania—had united in opposition to Moscow's aggression and imposed penalties, North Korea signaled that it took the opposite

side: one day before the test, Pyongyang’s foreign minister [released](#) a statement, attributed to a political “researcher,” placing all the blame for the crisis on the United States and echoing Russia’s rhetoric on the conflict. “The root cause of the Ukrainian crisis also lies in the high-handedness and arbitrariness of the US which has held on solely to the unilateral sanction and pressure while pursuing only global hegemony and military supremacy in disregard of the legitimate demand of Russia for its security,” read the statement, supposedly made by Ri Ji Song of the Society for International Politics Study.

Who Ri is, or whether the ostensible society actually exists, was probably unimportant—North Korea’s official channels are fond of citing a variety of sources, including those of questionable origin, inside and out of the country, who back its official line. What was more concerning was that Pyongyang’s capabilities, and official rhetorical line, appeared to be escalating and the US involvement in Ukraine—even limited to a supporting role—was perhaps serving as a pretext for an increasingly more alarming, and more provocative, round of tests. And indeed another [launch](#) followed on March 5, with a senior US defense official [stating](#) that the North appeared (based on similar parameters as the Feb. 27 launch) to be preparing a new ICBM sub-system in advance of an actual ICBM test-launch.

March 16 marked a watershed, as Pyongyang apparently made an [initial test](#) of its *Hwasong-17* “Monster” ICBM, which was [unveiled](#) in Fall 2020 at the 75th founding anniversary of North Korea’s ruling Workers’ Party. This brought to an end, as [anticipated](#), North Korea’s [self-imposed moratorium](#) on long-range ballistic missile [testing](#). The test failed, however, with the missile exploding spectacularly at an altitude of less than 20 km. The Kim regime was, unsurprisingly, mute on the test, leaving North Korea watchers unsure of what system was tested and thus if the failed March 16 launch was in reality a *Hwasong-17*. Ten days later analysts began to connect the failed March 16 test with a successful ICBM launch on March 24 (which followed an *amuse bouche* volley [fired](#) from multiple rocket launchers on March 20). The March 24 ICBM, launched on a highly lofted trajectory, was reported by Pyongyang to be the long-awaited *Hwasong-17*. But open-source intelligence analysts cast serious doubt on the claim, noting irregularities in the imagery provided to

substantiate the launch. Official US and South Korean government sources [later seconded](#) this judgment. Currently the relatively sure working hypothesis is that the March 16 failed launch was a *Hwasong-17*, while the March 24 successful ICBM launch was the already-proven *Hwasong-15*, which North Korea launched to make up for the March 16 failure. Pyongyang then ostensibly switched imagery of the two firings to give the impression that the successful March 24 launch was of a *Hwasong-17*.



Figure 3 North Korean leader Kim Jong Un meets troops who took part in a military parade to mark the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Korean People’s Revolutionary Army, in this undated photo released by North Korea’s Korean Central News Agency on April 29. Photo: KCNA via Reuters

This baroque story has numerous [implications](#). The first concerns North Korea’s capability to strike the continental United States with a larger payload (such as multiple warheads or high-quality penetration aids) than allowed by Pyongyang’s previous ICBMs. If the *Hwasong-17* in fact failed, then perhaps the regime is still a significant distance from placing multiple warheads on ICBMs, thus increasing the value of US strategic missile defense assets deployed to intercept a North Korean strike. Second, the standard explanation for potential North Korean deception about this ICBM test is that the Kim regime needed a successful test (following the failure on March 16) for domestic propaganda purposes, notably in the leadup to the April 15 110th Day of the Sun celebration and 90th anniversary of the founding of the Korean People’s Army (which also featured display of an apparently [new solid-fuel SLBM](#)). Yet the cost of this deception is non-negligible, as it dings the credibility/reliability of North Korea’s ICBM nuclear arsenal, and thus potentially of its deterrent value. If North Korea was willing to be deceptive about its ICBM tests in so obvious a manner, what else—especially regarding less verifiable components such as re-entry vehicle

survivability or guidance systems—about its ICBMs has it misrepresented?

In any event, regardless if Pyongyang's official channels are being forthright about the tests they have conducted, they continue to signal that they are not content with their current capabilities and will seek to increase them. On April 17, state media said Kim Jong Un had [overseen](#) the successful test-firing of a new tactical guided weapon “of great significance in drastically improving the firepower of the frontline long-range artillery units and enhancing the efficiency in the operation of tactical nukes of the DPRK and diversification of their firepower missions.” In the background, there are [signs](#) that the North [continues](#) work [producing](#) fissile materials for nuclear weapons, and is likely preparing for a seventh nuclear test, as evidenced by construction and tunneling at the [Punggye-ri test site](#). On April 26, Kim Jong Un said that his regime's nuclear arsenal may not necessarily be confined to deterrent purposes—perhaps hinting at tactical nuclear weapons use in warfighting scenarios. Earlier that month, his younger sister Kim Yo Jong fueled peninsular tension with [conditional threats](#) of nuclear weapons use. This, however, may have been a calculated measure to increase pressure on the US-South Korea defense and security relationship during a time of political transition in Seoul, US intelligence analysts argue.

Fueling distrust is something the North is apparently happy to do. Having given the conciliatory Moon Jae-in administration the cold shoulder since the 2019 Hanoi summit, when Moon's promises of better North Korean ties with Washington fizzled, Kim [sent](#) personal letters to the departing progressive president in late April thanking him for his work on behalf of “the great cause of the nation.” [Moon responded in kind](#). The existence of the missives was made public during a visit in Seoul by US North Korea Special Envoy Sung Kim, which again highlighted how during Moon's presidency Washington and Seoul were not sufficiently on the same page vis-à-vis Pyongyang.

The letters presumably did not include Kim taking responsibility for the stalemate in relations with the US or South Korea, and a few kind words for Moon cannot make up for the lost opportunities Moon likely sees in the past three years of his term (not to mention the [barbs](#) he has endured from Kim's little sister). They do, however, suggest that Kim is a savvy analyst of

politics in his rival countries. In both South Korea and the US, there are those who see the summitry of the 2018-19 period as a lost opportunity for peace on the Peninsula, something Moon could have achieved if the US had not stood in the way. This reservoir of distrust among South Korean progressives may cause a headache for the Yoon administration's desire to work with the Biden administration to be tougher on the Kim regime. With Moon departing in favor of a South Korean administration that has had more to say about improved ties with Japan than with the North (and which has [talked about](#) pre-emptively striking North Korea under certain unclear scenarios), North Korea may seek to change the narrative of post-Hanoi events, even as Kim signals that resumed nuclear testing lies on the horizon.

The good news is that all this suggests Pyongyang wants resolution and is not after armed conflict with the US-South Korea alliance, even as the Kim regime discusses new possible uses for its nuclear arsenal. However, a resolution that both North Korea and the US can accept has proven exceedingly difficult and it seems that Pyongyang's provocations will continue to escalate in the coming reporting period, possibly including nuclear (including tactical nuclear warhead) testing. There are also no clear off-ramps (although North Korea's new COVID-19 outbreak [might offer an opportunity](#) for humanitarian engagement). Biden's administration is preoccupied with Ukraine, including both its security dimensions and its attendant economic fallout. Multilateral action is also murky: the US has been [unable to push through](#) additional United Nations Security Council resolutions, with both China and Russia refusing to entertain the notion, *géopolitique oblige*. Consequently during the recent spasm of North Korean missile testing, the US resorted to designating [additional entities and individuals—including Russians](#)—through US domestic law.

This is likely to be the case for the foreseeable future as well. North Korea's initial *Hwasong-15* test in 2017 prompted tightened UN sanctions upon which the entire Security Council—including China and Russia—was able to agree. However, in the aftermath of the US-China trade war, a global pandemic that started in Wuhan, and Russia's Ukraine invasion, 2017 feels a lot further away than five years. Recently the most the US has been able to muster in terms of international condemnation of continued North Korean nuclear proliferation is [rhetorical](#)

[support](#) from states that do not have much leverage to shape Pyongyang's choices.

Conclusion: Do What You Can't

Looking forward to the Spring/Summer 2022 reporting period, a set of new impetuses will join the US-Korea dynamic already in progress as a clash between the rejuvenated US-South Korea alliance and North Korea's growing nuclear program. Those new impulses include a lot of known unknowns. Will North Korea [finally implement](#) a COVID vaccine program and import antiviral drugs in order to try to beat back an apparent COVID-19 outbreak? If it does not, how can the country begin to [sustainably open up](#) its borders for essential trade, notably with China and potentially Russia? If it does not manage to open up, nuclear negotiations will also likely be pushed back further even as Pyongyang continues its nuclear proliferation under the shadow of COVID-19. Relatedly, with the UNSC deadlocked regarding increased international sanctions against North Korea, will the US and selected states of the international community [step up](#) unorthodox methods of making Pyongyang's sanctions evasion harder, especially by cracking down on financing via [cryptocurrency theft](#)? It is fitting that the new US ambassador to South Korea is Philip Goldberg, a [known supporter](#) of aggressive sanctions enforcement against North Korea and other rogue regimes.

Strategic alterations are also afoot, even if in a nugatory stage. South Korea, for example, is experiencing a steady, and [now significant](#), increase in the percentage of its population in favor of developing indigenous nuclear weapons. The fact that this number is growing as a function of North Korean nuclear weapons development is worrisome, as the latter seemingly has no intention of halting (much less rolling back) its nuclear proliferation. Finally, what could a potentially developing strategic triangle among China, Russia, and North Korea look like? Would it be durable and would it be able to bring additional pressure on the US-South Korea alliance?

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY—APRIL 2022

Jan. 5, 2022: North Korea [fires](#) what appears to be a ballistic missile toward the East Sea.

Jan. 5, 2022: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [condemns](#) North Korea's latest missile test in his telephone conversation with Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa.

Jan. 7, 2022: Senior diplomats of South Korea and Iran [discuss](#) Iranian assets frozen here under US sanctions, with the thorny bilateral issue on the table for talks in Vienna aimed at restoring the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal. During the meeting, South Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun expressed hope for an early agreement on the nuclear deal, while the two sides shared the understanding that Tehran's frozen assets should be released soon.

Jan. 10, 2022: United States and five other countries (Albania, Britain, France, Ireland and Japan) [call](#) on North Korea to cease missile tests and engage in denuclearization negotiations. They argue the tests will advance the North's capabilities and add to its illicit arms exports.

Jan. 11, 2022: North Korea [fires](#) a suspected ballistic missile toward the East Sea, less than a week after it launched what it claimed to be a hypersonic missile. US Indo-Pacific Command characterized the North's projectile as a “ballistic missile,” which highlights the “destabilizing impact” of the North's illicit weapons program.

Jan. 11, 2022: Pentagon press secretary John Kirby [says](#) North Korea's latest missile test is in violation of UN Security Council resolutions, regardless of whether it involved a hypersonic missile as claimed by the North, said.

Jan. 11, 2022: Top nuclear envoys of South Korea and the US [hold](#) phone talks over North Korea's latest launch of a ballistic missile and stressed the importance of maintaining the allies' combined defense posture.

Jan. 12, 2022: US Department of Treasury [designates](#) five North Korean individuals, one based in Russia and four in China, for illegally procuring materials for the North's WMD and ballistic missile programs.

Jan. 13, 2021: Senior defense officials from South Korea, the US, and Japan [hold](#) phone talks to discuss North Korea's missile launches and reaffirm the importance of trilateral security cooperation.

Jan. 14, 2022: North Korea [fires](#) two suspected ballistic missiles eastward, South Korea's military said, after Pyongyang publicly warned earlier in the day of a “stronger and certain” response to the United States' imposition of new sanctions.

Jan. 15, 2022: Secretary Blinken [condemns](#) North Korea's recent missile tests as a violation of multiple UNSC resolutions and reaffirmed the “ironclad” security commitment to South Korea.

Jan. 16, 2022: United States [blasts](#) North Korea for its tactical guided missile test, which the North's official state news agency revealed was conducted by its railway-based missile regiment.

Jan. 17, 2022: Top nuclear envoys of South Korea, the US, and Japan [hold](#) discussion about North Korea's latest missile test and agreed to maintain close trilateral cooperation in the region.

Jan 19, 2022: Top trade officials of South Korea and the US [agree](#) to strengthen their strategic partnership to actively respond to supply chain issues, new technologies, and other major trade issues.

Jan. 20, 2022: State Department spokesperson [says](#) the US strongly [supports](#) humanitarian assistance for the people of North Korea but UNSC sanctions must be fully implemented at the same time.

Jan. 20, 2022: North Korea [holds](#) policymaking politburo meeting of the ruling Workers' Party presides over by Kim Jong Un and decides to consider restarting all temporally-suspended activities.

Jan. 20, 2022: South Korea's top nuclear envoy [holds](#) back-to-back phone talks with US and Chinese counterparts amid rising tension over North Korea's apparent threat of nuclear and long-range weapons tests.

Jan. 21, 2022: United States and seven other members of the UNSC [call](#) on all UN members to fully implement UNSC sanctions on North Korea.

Jan. 24, 2022: Department of Defense Press Secretary John Kirby says the US [continues](#) to call on North Korea to stop its provocations and instead return to dialogue to find ways to de-escalate tension.

Jan. 25, 2022: North Korea [fires](#) two suspected cruise missiles from an inland area, its fifth such test this year.

Jan. 27, 2022: North Korea [sets off](#) another volley of suspected short-range ballistic or tactical guided missiles. South Korean military authorities say the missiles landed in eastern waters off the Korean Peninsula.

Jan. 27, 2022: Department of Defense Press Secretary Kirby says the US is equally [focused](#) on dealing with the threat posed by North Korea just as it is with all other major security issues.

Jan. 28, 2022: South Korea's top trade official [calls](#) on the United States to swiftly begin talks to revise Section 232 tariffs on Seoul's steel exports. South Korean Trade Minister Yeo Han-koo made the request to US Trade Representative Katherine Tai during a meeting in Washington.

Jan. 30, 2022: North Korea [fires](#) ballistic missile toward the East Sea said South Korea's military. It conducted four other launches earlier this month, including those of what it claimed to be hypersonic missiles.

Feb. 3, 2022: Top diplomats of South Korea and the US [express](#) strong concern about recent advances in North Korea's missile program and stress the significance of diplomatic efforts to resume talks with Pyongyang.

Feb. 3, 2022: According to US congressional records, South Korea [seeks](#) to purchase six close-in weapon systems (CIWS) for its naval ships from the United States.

Feb. 4, 2022: Senior defense officials of South Korea, Japan and the US [hold](#) three-way talks to discuss ways to mitigate threats posed by North Korea, says the US Department of Defense.

Feb. 8, 2022: North Korea [harbors](#) an undisclosed missile operation base built specifically for a unit equipped with intermediate-range and potentially intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), according to a CSIS report.

Feb. 10, 2022: Top nuclear negotiators of South Korea, Japan and the US discuss ways to engage with North Korea.

Feb. 11, 2022: President Joe Biden [nominates](#) a senior member of the US foreign service, Philip Goldberg, as ambassador to South Korea.

Feb. 12, 2022: South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong, Secretary of State Blinken, and Japanese FM Hayashi [urge](#) North Korea to halt its destabilizing actions and return to dialogue.

Feb. 15, 2022: Biden administration's new Indo-Pacific strategy [looks](#) to cement trilateral cooperation with Asian allies, South Korea and Japan, as a core lever to counter China's assertiveness and North Korea's nuclear ambitions under its newly unveiled.

Feb. 22, 2022: More than half of South Koreans [support](#) the acquisition of nuclear weapons either through indigenous development or the deployment of US assets, according to a survey by Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

Feb. 24, 2022: South Korea [vows](#) to join the international community to impose export controls against Russia in case of a full-fledged invasion of Ukraine but stopped short of drawing up its own punitive measures against Moscow.

Feb. 24, 2022: President Moon Jae-in [says](#) South Korea will join international sanctions against Russia as he expressed regret over Russia's attack on Ukraine, saying any use of armed force causing human casualties cannot be justified.

Feb. 24, 2022: In an apparent warning to North Korea and China, the United States [deploys](#) an unspecified number of F-35A stealth fighter jets to Okinawa.

Feb. 25, 2022: Department of Defense spokesperson Kirby [says](#) the US [welcomes](#) South Korea's decision to impose sanctions on Russia for what the US calls an unlawful and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

Feb. 26, 2022: North Korea [ascribes](#) the armed conflict in Ukraine to US “high-handedness and arbitrariness,” accusing Washington of having pursued “military supremacy” in disregard of Russia's security concerns.

Feb. 26, 2022: Top diplomats of South Korea and the United States strongly [condemn](#) Russia's invasion of Ukraine and reaffirm their support for Ukraine.

Feb. 27, 2022: North Korea [fires](#) an unidentified projectile, says South Korea's military.

Feb. 28, 2022: South Korea [decides](#) to ban exports of strategic materials to Russia as part of efforts to join global sanctions against Moscow following its invasion of Ukraine.

March 1, 2022: South Korea [backs](#) a statement issued by 10 other members of the UN condemning North Korea's latest missile launch in the strongest terms.

March 4, 2022: South Korea wins an exemption from the United States' expanded export restrictions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine, [says](#) Seoul's industry ministry.

March 4, 2022: North Korea appears to continue producing fissile materials for nuclear weapons at its main Yongbyon nuclear facility, [says](#) a US monitoring website, citing recent satellite imagery of Yongbyon.

March 5, 2022: North Korea [fires](#) a ballistic missile toward the East Sea.

March 7, 2022: Analysts [say](#) recent photos taken from space show new buildings and other signs of work at North Korea's nuclear testing facility.

March 7, 2022: The chief of the UN nuclear watchdog [says](#) that signs of activity have been detected at North Korea's main Yongbyon nuclear complex and other facilities and called the reclusive regime's nuclear program deeply regrettable.

March 8, 2022: North Korea may resume nuclear and ICBM testing before the year's end, [says](#) a US government report.

March 9, 2022: US [intensifies](#) its intelligence collection activities around the Korean Peninsula.

March 9, 2022: UNSC [holds](#) a closed-door meeting to discuss North Korea's recent missile test, but fails to produce a text condemning the regime of its sanctions violations.

March 10, 2022: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [visits](#) the country's space agency, saying the recent development of a reconnaissance satellite is aimed at collecting information on the US military in the region and its “vassal forces.”

March 10, 2022: Opposition candidate Yoon Suk-yeol [is elected](#) South Korea's next president.

March 11, 2022: North Korea [appears](#) to be working to restore underground tunnels of its purportedly demolished Punggye-ri nuclear test site.

March 11, 2022: North Korea's two most recent missile launches [aim](#) to test a new ICBM system ahead of a possible full-fledged ICBM test, says a senior US official.

March 13, 2022: US [imposes](#) fresh sanctions on two Russian individuals and three entities for enabling North Korea's weapons program, says the US Treasury Department.

March 13, 2022: Getting US-Korea ties back on track will be a top priority, [says](#) President-elect Yoon at his first press conference after the election results were released.

March 16, 2022: North Korea [fires](#) an apparent ballistic missile, but the launch ended in failure, says South Korea's military.

March 16, 2022: USTR Tai [says](#) the South Korea-US free trade agreement (KORUS FTA) has greatly increased bilateral trade and investment but more can and should be done to advance the countries' economic ties.

March 20, 2022: North Korea [fires](#) four suspected shots from its multiple rocket launchers into the Yellow Sea says South Korean military officials.

March 22, 2022: President-elect Yoon [says](#) that North Korea's recent artillery firing was a violation of an inter-Korean military tension reduction agreement.

March 24, 2022: North Korea [fires](#) an apparent long-range ballistic missile toward the East Sea says South Korea's military. The North's move came four days after it fired four artillery shots into the Yellow Sea, apparently using multiple rocket launchers.

March 24, 2022: South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Secretary of State Blinken [discuss](#) North Korea's missile tests over the phone, condemning them as violating UNSC resolutions.

March 24, 2022: US [condemns](#) North Korea's launch of an ICBM, vowing to take all necessary measures to ensure the security of the country and its allies.

March 25, 2022: North Korea [says](#) that it successfully test-fired a new ICBM, called the *Hwasong-17*, the previous day on the direct order of leader Kim Jong Un.

March 27, 2022: US and South Korean intelligence [believe](#) the ICBM launched by North Korea was actually a *Hwasong-15* missile disguised to look like the newer, larger *Hwasong-17*, according to South Korean military sources.

March 28, 2022: President-elect Yoon [calls](#) for closer trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan to deter North Korea from pursuing its nuclear weapons program in a meeting with Japan's ambassador.

March 28, 2022: Biden administration [seeks](#) a 4.1% increase in defense spending, citing the US' growing competition with China and threats from North Korea.

March 30, 2022: South Korea [conducts](#) its first successful launch of a solid-fuel space rocket as part of a project to deploy civilian and military surveillance satellites, says the Defense Ministry.

April 1, 2022: US [imposes](#) fresh sanctions on five North Korean entities involved in the North's recent missile tests that included its first ICBM launch in over four years.

April 3, 2022: Kim Yo Jong, sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, [blasts](#) South Korea's defense minister for highlighting Seoul's "preemptive strike" capabilities and threatens the South for making such "reckless" remarks, according to Pyongyang's state media.

April 4, 2022: Top nuclear envoys of South Korea and the IS [agree](#) to jointly push for a new UNSC resolution against North Korea over its recent series of ballistic missile launches.

April 5, 2022: South Korean delegates representing President-elect Yoon [discuss](#) the possible deployment of US strategic assets to South Korea in a meeting with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

April 5, 2022: US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim and China's Liu Xiaoming [meet](#) in Washington for talks on ways to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula.

April 6, 2022: US and its allies are prepared to deal with any further provocations by North Korea, [says](#) US special envoy for North Korea, noting the recalcitrant state may conduct a nuclear test in the future.

April 6, 2022: US [seeks](#) to ensure peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region partly by reinvigorating its trilateral cooperation with South Korea and Japan, says US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman.

April 9, 2022: North Korea [condemns](#) the US for making the crisis surrounding Ukraine a human rights issue and imposing sanctions against Russia, denouncing US President Biden as "an old man in his senility" and a man of a "repeated slip of tongue."

April 12, 2022: US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier [enters](#) the international waters of the east of the Korean Peninsula, in an apparent show of America's military might.

April 12, 2022: Head of the UN civil aviation agency [urges](#) North Korea to make prior notifications on its missile launches, saying Pyongyang's unannounced missile tests pose a risk to international civil aviation.

April 15, 2022: North Korea [holds](#) celebrations for the 110th birth anniversary of late founder Kim Il Sung with fireworks and a mass dance performance in its capital, footage from state media showed.

April 17, 2022: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [oversees](#) the successful test-firing of a new tactical guided weapon meaningful in improving the efficiency of tactical nuclear operations.

April 18, 2022: US special representative for North Korea Sung Kim [says](#) that Seoul and Washington will respond “responsibly and decisively” to Pyongyang's provocative acts while voicing concerns over its “escalatory actions.”

April 20, 2022: South Korea [will](#) set up a task force to deal with its potential participation in a US-led economic framework, as the United States accelerates preparations to launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

April 21, 2022: South Korea successfully [test-fires](#) two submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) consecutively earlier this week, in a sign the missile is nearing operational deployment.

April 25, 2022: North Korea [holds](#) a military parade in Pyongyang to mark a key national anniversary, in what was seen as a highly choreographed event to cement internal unity and highlight its military heft. During the parade, North Korea rolls out what appears to be a new type of solid fuel missile alongside the country's largest-known ICBM.

April 26, 2022: President-elect Yoon [says](#) he will “positively review” South Korea's joining of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, an anti-China security partnership, if invited, according to a report.

April 26, 2022: South Korea and the US [sign](#) their first bilateral document on joint space policy research, in their latest push to reinforce cooperation in the increasingly crucial security domain.

